Mary Ritter Beard

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Recommended Citation
Mary Ritter Beard
August 7, 1876—August 14, 1958

Mary Ritter Beard was a pioneering scholar in women's history and a social reformer during the Progressive Era. She campaigned for women's suffrage, advocated improved conditions for the working class, and critiqued women's education, but it was her vision of women's history that most vividly shaped her life and work. It is primarily in this context that she made her contribution to the dialogue on social education.

Mary was born on August 7, 1876, near Indianapolis, Indiana, to Eli Foster Ritter and Narcissa Lockwood. The fourth of seven children, Mary grew up in what appears to be a traditional mid-western environment. Always a strong student, she graduated valedictorian of her high school class and then, like her father and siblings, attended De Pauw University. She was recognized for her leadership there and upon graduation became a member of Phi Delta Kappa.

It was also at De Pauw that Mary Ritter met the future historian Charles Austin Beard, whom she married in 1900. By all accounts, theirs was a strong and supportive partnership in which they raised two children and wrote seven books.

Shortly after their wedding, the Beards moved to Manchester, England, where Charles helped to develop Ruskin Hall, a college for working class men, and where their first child, a daughter, was born in 1901. Over the next three years, Mary Ritter Beard's interest in women's history and working class issues intensified. Under the influence of British socialists and radical suffragists like Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst, Beard adopted a feminist perspective and concern for social justice that remained throughout her life.

In 1902 the Beards returned to the United States and settled in New York City, close to Columbia University, where she and Charles both enrolled in graduate school. Though her husband earned his doctorate at Columbia and then taught on the faculty there until 1917, Mary Beard left the program in 1904. By 1910 she was devoting much of her time and energy to raising her two children and to working for women's suffrage and various labor causes. She aligned herself with Alice Paul's radical wing of the woman's suffrage movement and became a leader in the Congressional Union, which later became the Woman's Party.

With the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920, many leaders in the suffrage movement, including Alice Paul, turned their attention to passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, a measure designed to provide legal equality for women. Beard, however, never supported the Equal Rights Amendment because she believed it would negatively impact working class women by dismantling the protective legislation they had worked so hard to attain. Beard believed that developing equality in an unjust capitalist system was not in the interests of women and that, instead, women should use their talents to reshape the system itself.

Partly as a result of the conflict over the Equal Rights Amendment and her growing belief in the creative power of women, particularly those in the working class, in the 1920s Beard began to attend less to social activism and more to writing and promoting women's history. Like other early 20th-century New Historians, Beard called for a broader, more inclusive history that would encompass social and economic themes and would serve as a vehicle for dealing more effectively with contemporary problems. Unlike other historians, however, Beard emphasized the role of women in history.

She wrote and edited numerous books on the topic, including On Understanding Women (1931); America Through Women's Eyes (ed., 1933); and her best known work, Women as Force in History: A Study in Traditions and Realities (1946), in which she argues that, contrary to popular belief, women had, from the beginning, been active agents in history, not merely passive victims. The fact that the rich history of women had been largely written out of the record did not negate its existence. History, Beard argued, could not be whole without the story of women who had always been at the center of developing civilization. She believed that once modern women appreciated their own historical significance, they would no longer strive for incorporation into the male world, but would try to reshape the world to their own uniquely female vision. The series of highly successful textbooks that Beard wrote with her husband...
on American civilization also reflect this inclusive perspective.

As a writer of women’s history, Beard’s most productive years were the 1930s and 1940s, but these decades also brought her a series of disappointments. She spent the years from 1935 to 1940 in an ill-fated effort to create the Women’s Center for World Archives, a project she hoped would restore women to the historical record and provide contemporary women with an intellectual center for research, education, and political initiatives. Though this project never came to fruition, Beard is credited with a role in the development of women’s archives at both Radcliffe and Smith Colleges. In 1941 Beard began an eighteen-month project that critiqued the male bias in the Encyclopedia Britannica and provided suggestions for its improvement. Despite assurances from Britannica’s editor, few of the suggestions were ever implemented.

Beard demonstrated remarkable good health, energy, and productivity well into her seventies. Charles Beard died in 1948. In 1953, Mary Beard published The Force of Women in Japanese History and in 1955, The Making of Charles Beard. She spent the last few years of her life living with her son and died on August 14, 1958 at the age of eighty-two.

Mary Ritter Beard’s life and work contributed to the development of social education in the United States in both direct and indirect ways. The widely used textbooks written by the Beards were innovative in their approach to social and economic history and in their treatment of the role of women in civilization. Mary Beard also left an indirect legacy that includes women’s studies programs as well as high school and college courses on the history of women, both of which she strongly promoted in the first half of the 20th century.

References


Mary Ritter Beard’s papers are located at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College; Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College; and De Pauw University.